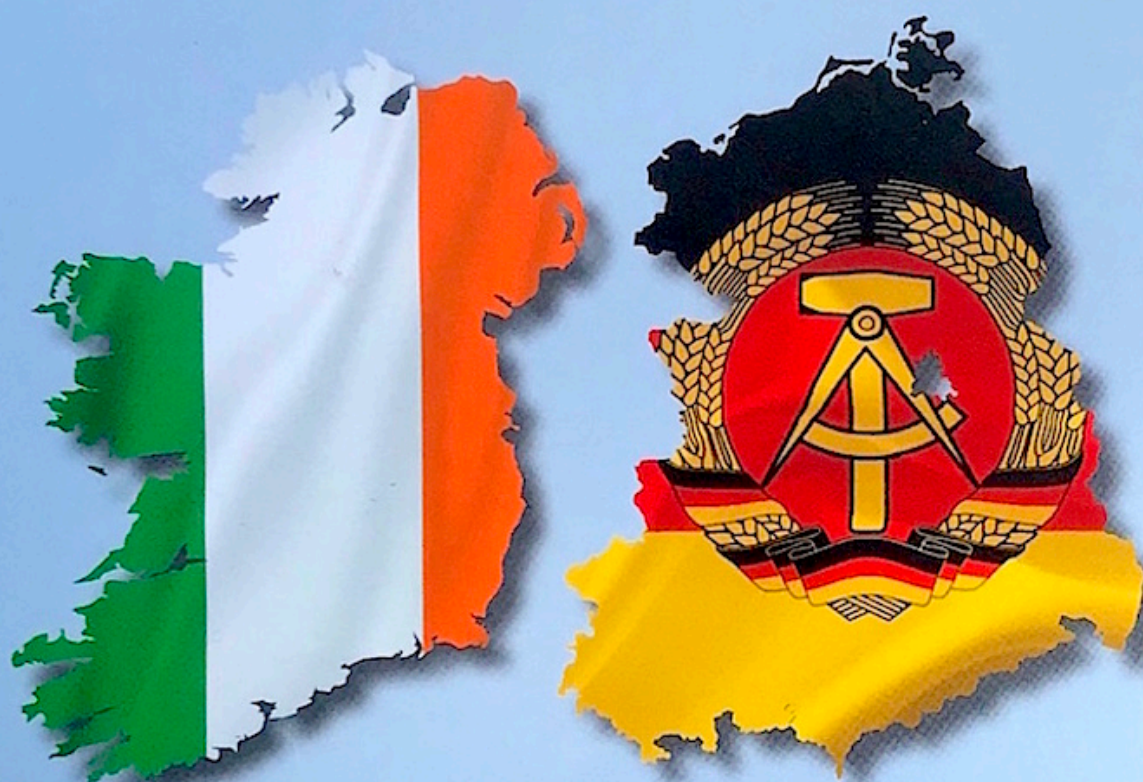


IRISH-GERMAN STUDIES

11

Gisela Holfter, Deirdre Byrnes, Jean E. Conacher (eds)



PERCEPTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Exploring Connections between
Ireland and the GDR

WWT

Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN (2003-2009)¹: An audio-visual ethnography of a globalized present (Lausitz, Eastern Germany)

Mark Curran

*Der Herrgott hat die Lausitz erschaffen
und der Teufel hat die Kohle darunter versteckt
God created the Lausitz (Lusatia) and the devil hid
the coal beneath it
(Sorbish Saying)*

The Lausitz lies in the southeastern part of the Province of Brandenburg in the former East Germany (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR*) where it meets the Polish border. Of Sorb origin (a Slavic language group), it has been shaped by the timeline of industrialization, and along with its capital, Cottbus/Chosebuz, was later defined as a Model State and the energy heartland of the DDR. The *Tagebau*, part of the largest opencast mining territory in Europe, until recently owned by a Swedish energy multinational, lies north, east and south of the city. While the *Braunkohle* (lignite) will eventually be depleted, it continues to be extended, leading to the destruction of century-old Sorb villages.

I first visited the Lausitz in September 2003, seeking the impact of migrations and flows of global capital in the then eastern periphery of the European Union, as had been experienced in my native Ireland in the far west. Having already completed a project in the Dublin and county region between 1999 and 2001, critically focused on the spaces of development and finance, as the country experienced the largest economic development in its history, I was intent on broadening my understanding of such globalizing forces. However, instead of my expectant witnessing of material forms evidencing the transformative influence of global capital, I quickly realized that the Lausitz region was in fact the antithesis of this experience. Prior to the global economic collapse of 2007/2008, I encountered an emptying and the recognition that the same globalizing forces which was transforming unrestrained the landscape of my birth, were indeed changing this landscape through its forces of withdrawal and seepage, in a process, for me, of “globalized haemorrhaging”. As a result, jobs were going further east while its younger population migrated to the more prosperous west. In 2004, the last major textile factory

1 *Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN* was generously supported through funding from the Arts Council of Ireland.

would close relocating to Romania and subsequently, Albania, and in 2007, the Lausitz came last in a government-funded national survey addressing regional future prospects, entitled the “Zukunftsatlas” (Atlas of the Future).² Thus, here in what, following the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, now arguably constituted the heart of Europe, as with much of the former East Germany at this time, the region was struggling to determine a future in a globalized context.

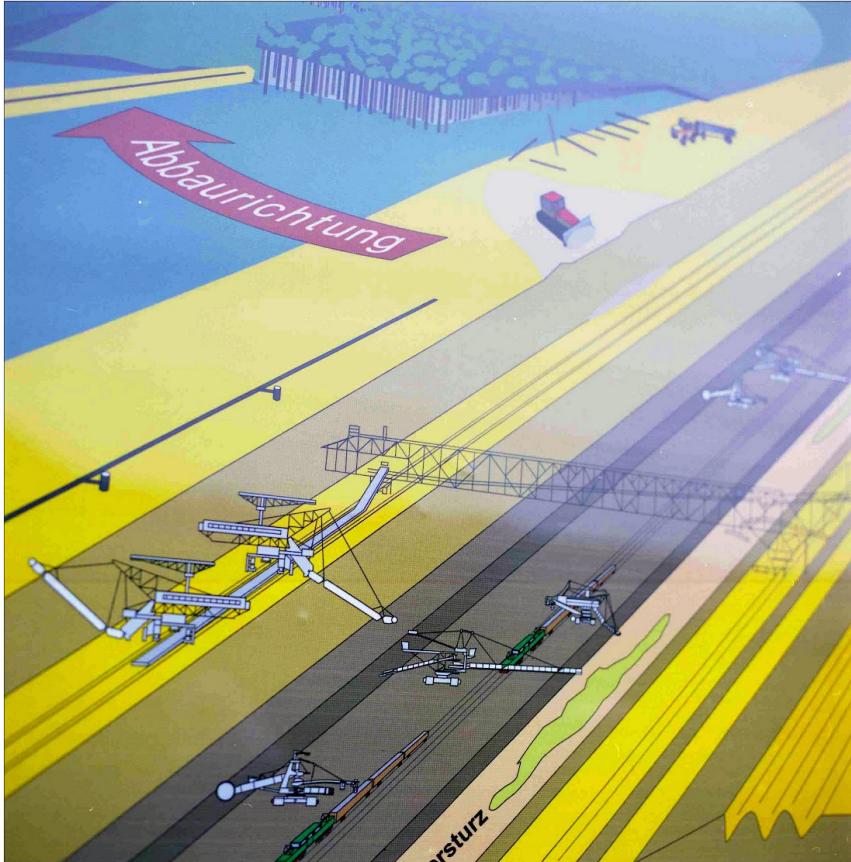


Fig. 1: Tagebau Cottbus Nord, Lausitz, September 2006

By way of context, *Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN (2003-2009)*, is the third of what I define as a cycle of long-term research projects, beginning in the late 1990s, which seeks to address the predatory impact resulting

² Published in 2007, the Zukunftsatlas developed by the *Prognos* research institute outlined the challenges facing German provinces. See <http://www.prognos.com/Zukunftsatlas-2007-Regionen.173.0.html>, accessed 5 January 2011.

from the flows and migrations of global capital. The first two projects were completed in Ireland, and in addition to this project undertaken in Eastern Germany, my current ongoing multi-sited transnational project titled, THE MARKET, focuses on the functioning and condition of the global markets and the role of financial capital,³ the sphere, I argue, which has defined the circumstance of the previous three projects. I wish now to provide an overview of the project under discussion here, with brief reference to the rationale for its installation, its significance to the other projects and relationship to the Federal Republic's socio-economic experience.

Six years after the *Wende* and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the East German historian and writer Hanna Behrend addressed the "painful transformation" of the "steamroller unification" but forewarned how the destruction and dismantlement of an economy was a "characteristic instance of processes happening elsewhere".⁴ The political scientist Lawrence McFalls observes, too, that following the "shock therapy of unification ... subject to the colonizing forces of globalization ... East Germans can now be seen as ahead of westerners, for better or for worse, on their path to a neoliberal global society".⁵ In the context of the subsequent global economic collapse, I would assert that the prophetic experiences of this region only further reinforced how it had undergone momentous transformative economic and political periods throughout the course of its history, from industrialization to socialism, but critically and centrally, how the region held and holds significant and important insight because of its socio-economic experience and neo-liberalized status, regarding the "restructuring of societal relations"⁶ as a result of the functioning of neoliberal globalization, for citizens and communi-

3 The cycle began with SOUTHERN CROSS (Gallery of Photography/Cornerhouse 2002) which surveyed the spaces of development and finance of the so-called "Celtic Tiger" economy of the Irish Republic between 1999 and 2001. This was followed by The Breathing Factory (Edition Braus/Belfast Exposed/Gallery of Photography 2006), the outcome of my doctoral research, sited in a multinational complex in Leixlip in the east of Ireland which addressed the role and representation of labour, global labour practices, the fragile nature of globalised industrial space and the relationship to curatorial practice. The cycle continues with this project, Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN (2011) and now my current project, THE MARKET, on the functioning and condition of the global markets and the role of financial capital. These have been presented extensively as exhibition, installation and publication.

4 Hanna Behrend (ed.), *German Unification: The Destruction of an Economy*. London: Pluto, 1995, p. 30.

5 Lawrence McFall, Eastern Germany Transformed: From Postcommunist to Late Capitalist Political Culture. *German Politics and Society* 17/2 (1999), pp. 1-24, here pp. 2-3.

6 McFall, Eastern Germany Transformed, pp. 2-3.

ties not only nationally but, globally including Ireland. As the anthropologist Michael Burawoy states in his discussion of “Global Ethnography”:

[Linking] the large-scale processes and the fine-grained observation of everyday life...allowing us to see what is happening in the local settings but never losing sight of the fall and rise of empires, or shifts in the organizations and reach of capitalism. Global Ethnography presents the local and the global as mutually constitutive.⁷

While travelling this region, certain key research questions evolved: how to represent this evolving and complex landscape? How to address the apparent need to include the voices of those that lived there? What was my role and whom was I to re-present? And critically, how to convey and articulate a sense of the local here and now, one embodied with critical relevance and resonance for the global elsewhere? This last question in particular fundamentally framed the formation of the project, its research methodology, methods and the subsequent formulation and re-narration of the research material as an installation.



Fig. 2: Sabine, Angelika and the author, Control Room, Tagebau Cottbus Nord, Lausitz, Eastern Germany, May 2007 (exchanging prints)

My research practice is one centrally informed by visual and media anthropology and framed by ethnography as the process of research. Therefore, the length of time undertaken was decisive as an outsider, to improve my understanding of German. For example, at the time of my first visit in 2003, the

7 Michael Burawoy et al, *Global Ethnography Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 29.

majority of people I encountered over the age of thirty-five had Russian as their second language. Such a better competency helped to facilitate the building of personal relationships, negotiate access and, mindful of my position as someone not from the region, to allow for a deeper understanding of the socio-economic, cultural and political context. The project was undertaken over repeated extended stays in the region, normally ranging from two to five weeks, which began in September 2003 and ended in August 2008. An in-depth discussion of the theoretical and methodological is beyond scope of this reflection,⁸ however, I can outline that in addition to my research specifically related to the Lausitz, the project incorporated as research methods the maintenance of field-notes throughout the research process, alongside photography, digital-video self-portraiture, soundscape and cross-generational oral testimony. I wish to acknowledge the central role of the testimonies from the mineworkers and younger people living in the region and the making of the digital video self-portraits.

Primarily, the young people were individuals whom I had met and befriended at the university or through already established local contacts where, for example, I made a presentation on the project to a local youth group and also at the university. Access to the *Tagebau* was facilitated through my relationship with the City Hall. On my first visit to the region, I had arranged to meet the public representative responsible for attracting economic investment into the region and subsequently, following a process of negotiation, I gained access to the mine. Each visit was pre-planned, and I was accompanied at all times by a representative working for the multinational owner. Introductions to individual miners were made through this person, many of whom she had known since beginning to work at the mine, all having started at the same time following their completion of high school. Seeking to critically address personal histories and embedded cultural memory, the role of oral testimony was imperative, as the words of those who witnessed, and/or participated in, events, or those born after the *Wende* and encultured with such memories, now framed, however, by what can only be described as dire economic circumstance. Conversations focused on personal histories and were undertaken in a way in which it was open for the person to elaborate, or not, affording as fluid a type of discussion as possible within such a defined context.

8 The methodological approach and research methods are addressed in greater detail in relation both to my doctoral research (see Mark Curran, *The Breathing Factory: Locating the Global Labouring Body. Journal of Media Practice* 9/2 (2008), pp. 139-52) and to this project (see Mark Curran, *Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN: Re-representing the "Wounded" Landscape of the Lausitz, Eastern Germany. Photographies* 6/2 (2013), pp. 193-223).

In addition, all the individuals who contributed to the project agreed to have photographic portraits made, however I, subsequently, also asked them to collaborate on the making of digital video self-portraits. Mutually agreed and co-authored, these self-portraits locate people in their everyday, including sites of work, study or home. The individuals presented themselves to the camera alone (I had withdrawn from the scene), remained for as long as they wished and subsequently walked out of the frame. Pivotal to informing my understanding has been David Green's assertion that the still image remains inherently defined as the past, while the moving image invokes the present;⁹ while intended as another level of evocation in representational terms, critically, the self-portraits also function as an explicit and conscious intervention to reference the core of the project's concern with a living community of the here and now, and the complex conditions of its functioning. The format, in addition to its visual relationship to the photograph, conceptually draws upon the critique of movement and its associations with, and grounding in, modernity,¹⁰ and, thereby, simultaneously represents a possible act of defiance on the part of those portrayed.

The social anthropologist, Sarah Pink, argues that the researcher requires "a flexible agency, combining the sensible and intelligible, denotative and evocative and the ability to make intellectual leaps to bridge gaps forged by the illusion of disparateness ... [A] flexible representation underscores the linkages of experience and reality, imagination and reason, difference and commonality ... the tack between the analytical and the sensible...which constitute scholarly argument".¹¹ The intentionality of the methodological approach incorporating multi-media was to construct a three-dimensional montage or multivocal intervention, regarding a region possessing an industrialized and socialist past, but critically to evoke and re-represent the significance of its globalized present.

The installation is formatted so all elements are projection-based. The still photographs of landscapes and artefactual material, including a map, are presented as single analogue slides in a series of single projectors, except

9 My conception regarding the role of still and moving image is informed by Green's essay on the work of the Belgian artist, David Claerbout (see David Green, *The Visibility of Time*. In: David Green (ed.), *Visible Time: The Work of David Claerbout*. Brighton: Photoworks, 2004, pp. 34-43).

10 The inherent political potential of stillness is outlined by Paul Harrison, *Remaining Still*. *M/C Journal* 12/1 (2009). <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/135>, accessed 21 December 2018.

11 Sarah Pink, *Doing Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London: Sage, 2001, p. 118.

those of the workstations from the textile factory, which rotate over and over on a single carousel. The digital video self-portraits are installed centrally, facing each other, opposite, to visually embody a relationship centred upon that present and existing community of the here and now and where the viewer is positioned, in between. The audio and installations soundscape accompanying these portraits is derived from the biggest earth excavator on the planet and hums its origins in a modernity that now encapsulates the complete space and the viewer. In other spaces of the installation, extracts of testimony fade in and out, words replacing the words of those just uttered alongside the sound of the fans of the slide projectors reminding the viewer of the apparatus of their construction, while the slides over the course of the installation are slowly erased and eventually disappear.

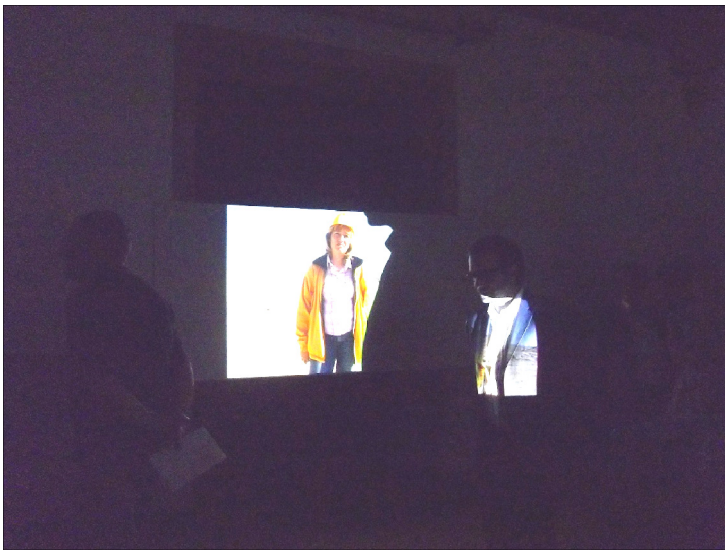


Fig. 3: Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN (installation image),
Encontros Da Imagem, Braga, Portugal, September-October 2011

Throughout the installation, the falling of the viewer's shadows on these projected images and words are intended to implicate them repeatedly in this process, in this history, in the midst of an installation, in the midst of a history that could disappear at any moment. The intention is to reflect upon the nature of the photograph, its nebulosity and the fleetingness of image encounters, but pivotally, to evoke the experiential-scapes and critically re-represent the potentially ephemeral context in which this community in the former East Germany finds itself. *Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN* was constructed in the context of a landscape shaped by and inscribed with the utopic

ideological aspirations of modernity – industrialization, Socialism and now at great cost, neoliberal globalization. Pivotal to the project is the catalyst for the region, the *Tagebau* and critically seeing it as perhaps a metaphor for late capitalism itself – finite, fragile and ultimately, unsustainable.

The central research for the project was undertaken at a time when the Republic of Ireland was gripped in the frenzied heights of the so-called “Celtic Tiger” economy. Therefore, it is also important to acknowledge, beyond popular media reports, as with the former East Germany, that there was a great absence of critical audiovisual research projects and/or other media engagement with the socio-economic circumstance of the country at this time. I was overtly aware, too, of a general media and political narrative of unreserved and overwhelming optimism. Perhaps, this was understandable in the context of the economic history of the Federal Republic and the startling rate at which the situation unfolded. Nonetheless, I firmly believe these factors played a central role in the limited critical enquiry at this time. Unfortunately, the basis for the transformation would become a model of devastating economic unsustainability, for the country and its citizens with an enormous price to be paid.

At the beginning of 2007, the Republic of Ireland had boasted a decade of full employment for the first time in its history. By 2011, however, the national unemployment rate was 14.7%. Over four short years, in the context of a global economic meltdown and the collapse of a debt-driven housing bubble, this republic became one of the global recession’s worst casualties. It remains somewhat incomprehensible and difficult to both portray and articulate the calamitous scale of these events. As a result of globalization and home-grown economic failures, the Republic of Ireland was viciously exposed to the whims of international markets, rating agencies and the demands of cross-state relationships.

This research project, and those of the cycle, argue for the pre-existence of the conditions, revealing vulnerabilities, which were evident prior to the financial crash of 2007/2008. With the additional benefit of hindsight on the sustainability of Ireland’s economic growth, how vulnerable was Ireland, and indeed does it remain, with its prevailing dependency on Foreign Direct Investment and exposure to global market fluctuations? Aside from any political ramifications, there is continuing evidence of the unrestrained and unforgiving material consequences that result from a lack of any constraint on global capital flows. In such a continuing and evolutionary globalized context, I finish with the powerful insight offered during a conversation in September of 2006 in Cottbus, with Konrad, a young student: “Globalization promises that all will be wonderful...but people know now it is an unfair process and they are affected by it ... even their very existence ...”.

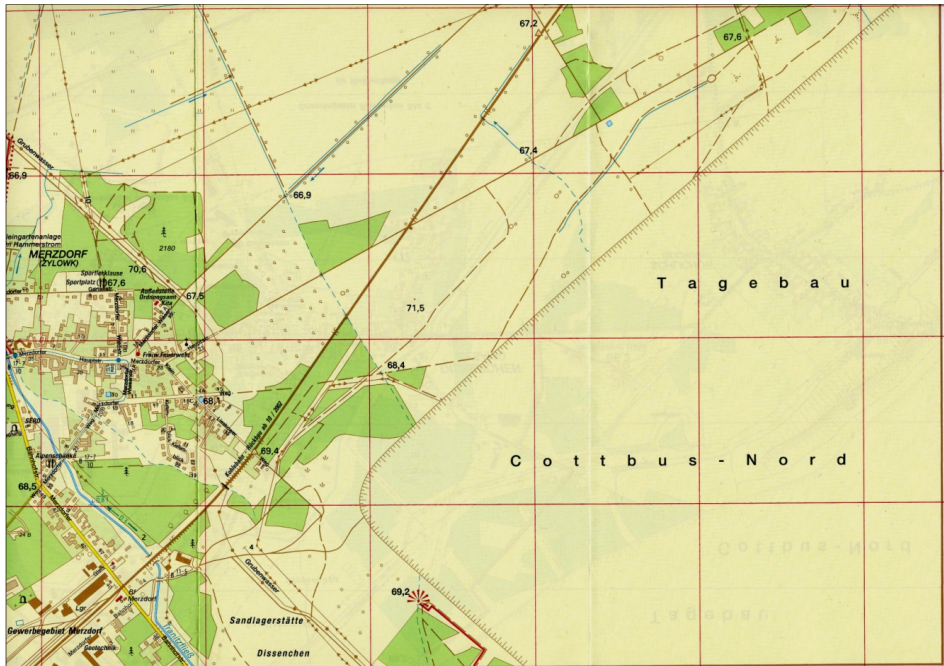
Ausschnitte aus EDEN / Extracts from EDEN
(2003-2009)



'untitled' (looking East)
Tagebau Cottbus Nord, Lausitz,
Eastern Germany,
January 2007

...just look at the region on *Google maps*...you see the city and then...Tagebau, Tagebau, Tagebau...it looks terrible...a wound on the landscape...in the end there will be nothing left...we need to find another way...

Marco, Student, Cottbus, January 2007



‘untitled’ (detail/map)

Cottbus, Lausitz,
Eastern Germany



Katja, Student (self-portrait)
Cottbus,
Eastern Germany
May 2007
(dv stills)

...many industries have broken down...clothing, textile companies...all moved away...and now the coal which is one of the biggest facilities...prognosis is 10 to 15 years...then you have digged down all the coal...people don't think about the time afterwards...they just think of being today and don't think of tomorrow...

Daniel, Student, Cottbus, September 2006



Angelika, Miner (self-portrait)
Lausitz,
Eastern Germany
July 2008
(dv still)

Simon (self-portrait)
Cottbus,
Eastern Germany
August 2008
(dv still)



'untitled'
(empty socialist housing projects
in process of being dismantled),
Neu Schmellwitz, Lausitz,
Eastern Germany,
September 2008

...everything associated with the DDR (former East Germany) system was simply gone...and for the older generation, whether a party member or not, it has been very difficult, almost impossible, to get used to...for me it was only 10 years of my life...but for my parents, it was over half their lives...simply gone...removed...

Marco, Student, Cottbus, January 2007



Gina, Student
Cottbus, Lausitz,
Eastern Germany,
September 2003
(still photograph)



Ralf, Miner
Lausitz,
Eastern Germany,
January 2007
(still photograph)

...globalisation promises that all will be wonderful...but
people know now it is an unfair process and they are af-
fected by it...even their very existence...

Konrad, Student, Cottbus, September 2006



**‘disused workstations’,
Steilmann Textile Factory
(one week before closure),
Cottbus, Lausitz,
Eastern Germany,
April 2004**



Thomas, Student
Cottbus, Lausitz,
Eastern Germany,
September 2003
(still photograph)



'untitled'
**(empty socialist housing projects
in process of being dismantled)**
Neu Schmellwitz, Lausitz,
Eastern Germany,
September 2008

...I live in two worlds, one that was before *the Wende*
and now the one after...and that is not easy...

Angelika, Miner, Tagebau Jänschwalde, Lausitz,
July 2007



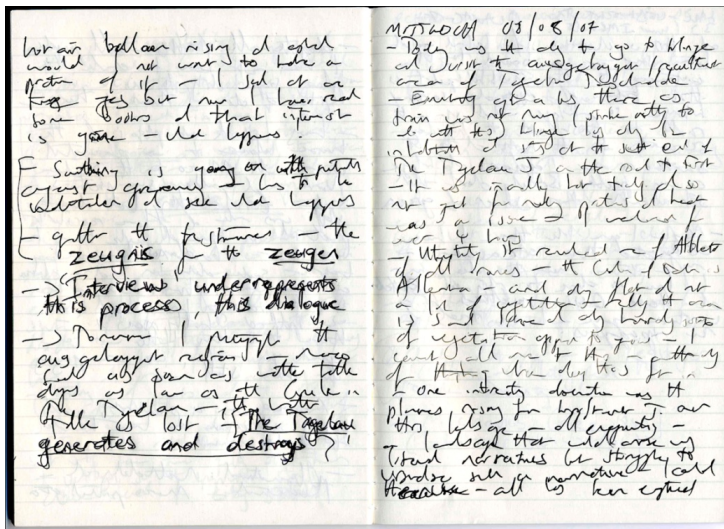
Linda, Student (self-portrait)
Cottbus, Eastern Germany,
July 2007
(dv still)



Walter, Miner (self-portrait)
Lausitz, Eastern Germany,
July 2008
(dv still)

...all your family is here and will stay here as well and so your history will stay here...and so a friend says he doesn't want to leave Eastern Germany because he doesn't want to lose Eastern Germany...he wants to rebuild it in his way or be part of the rebuilding...

Thomas, Student, Cottbus, September 2003



'Tagebau generates and destroys'
Ralf, Miner
fieldnotes
Lausitz, Eastern Germany,
July 2007

...if you dig out a village, nothing can ever be built on it again...it all disappears...a mining company comes from outside...digs into the earth, takes whatever is precious, makes money from it...however, we are the ones who disappear...

Daniel, Student, Cottbus, September 2006



‘untitled’ (looking East)
Tagebau Cottbus Jänschwalde,
Lausitz, Eastern Germany,
January 2007